

A Ritual Path above Manchaug Pond
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Rattlesnake Hill **GPS 42.104801, -71.784812**

Sutton, Massachusetts, is a Blackstone Valley town south of Millbury and Grafton. The first survey of the Sutton area, published in 1715, shows the Indian praying village of Hassanamesit within the boundaries of Sutton. Hassanamesit, once the center of the Nipmuck Indian Nation, is now Grafton, more or less, which cuts into the northeastern corner of Sutton where the Blackstone River passes. Manchaug Pond lies in the southwestern corner of Sutton, six miles from the old Hassanamesit boundary. Rattlesnake Hill overlooks the pond from its northern shore.

The hill rises quickly from the shore to a summit 120 feet above the pond. When the trees are bare, the summit provides a full-circle view of the surrounding hills, near and far. To the north, the hill descends slowly for 220 meters to an old wagon road. The eastern and western flanks of the hill drop sharply. The tract containing Rattlesnake Hill is part of Waters Farm (circa 1750) which is listed in the State Register of Historic Places. The last owner gave the farm to the town. The Sutton Historical Commission maintains the farmhouse and adjacent field for public activities; the Sutton Conservation Commission oversees the remainder of the land, most of which is wooded.

The Stone Row

From the intersection of two gravel roads, Waters Road and the old Sutton Falls wagon road, a single-course stone row runs in a zigzag or sawtooth pattern east-northeast for 60 meters. Then, it turns and runs up Rattlesnake Hill south-southeast for 170 meters. The easterly row is approximately straight. The southerly row makes a long shallow curve and then straightens and runs directly toward the summit of the hill. Clear evidence of the row stops 40 meters before the summit.

The row contains 85 large stones weighing approximately 150 to 300 pounds at the points of the sawteeth. The 84 intermediate legs contain smaller stones weighing approximately 10 to 50 pounds. The lengths of the individual legs are generally close to their average length of 3.3 meters (four megalithic yards), indicating that the row was built to a measurement. If the entire row were straightened, it would be 275 meters long. Until the accumulated dead leaves were removed from the row in 1990, only a few sawteeth near the summit were visible and were known locally as the "stone (semi)circles".

Walking the Row

The beginning of the row near Waters Road is marked by a slab holding a pile of fist-size stones. If trees were not in the way, the summit and the high end of the row could be seen from this point. The sawtooth legs of the easterly row lead to the turning point at the base of the spine of the hill. This point is marked by a quarried slab with an iron drill mark. Here, a leg of the row curves slightly to conform to the shape of the slab. Near this point, two stone disks were found.

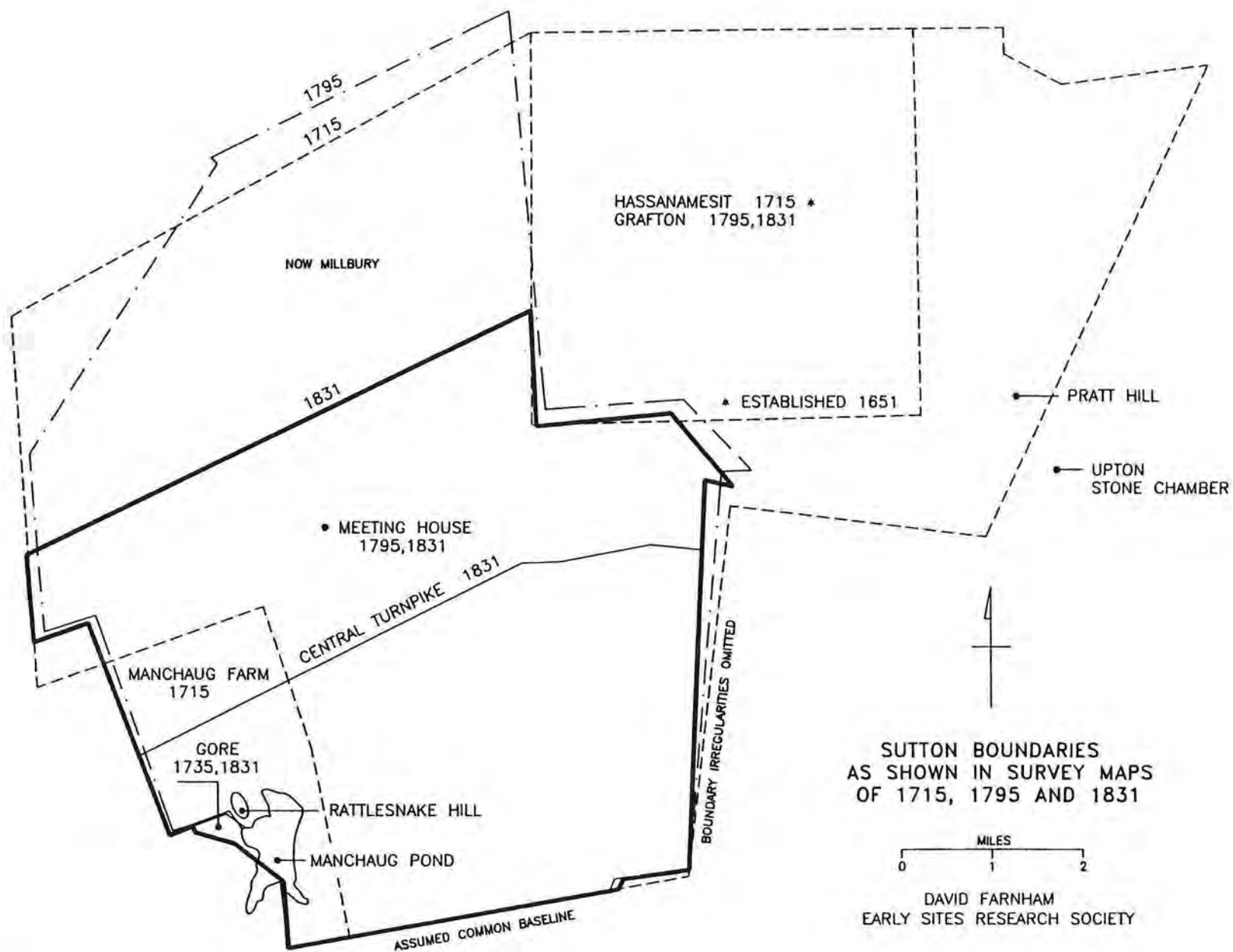
After the row turns south, it climbs a short rise where two legs are built closely around a large natural boulder; then, the row rises slowly to its end near the summit. The point toward which the row aims is marked at the summit by a platform-like slab that is approached by what appears to be a five-meter-long rough stairway built of flat stones. Near the summit slab, four quartz choppers were found in a large pit. Walking the row attentively produces changes in perception as the walker moves from the sheltered low end, through transitions of direction and elevation, to the expansiveness of the high end.

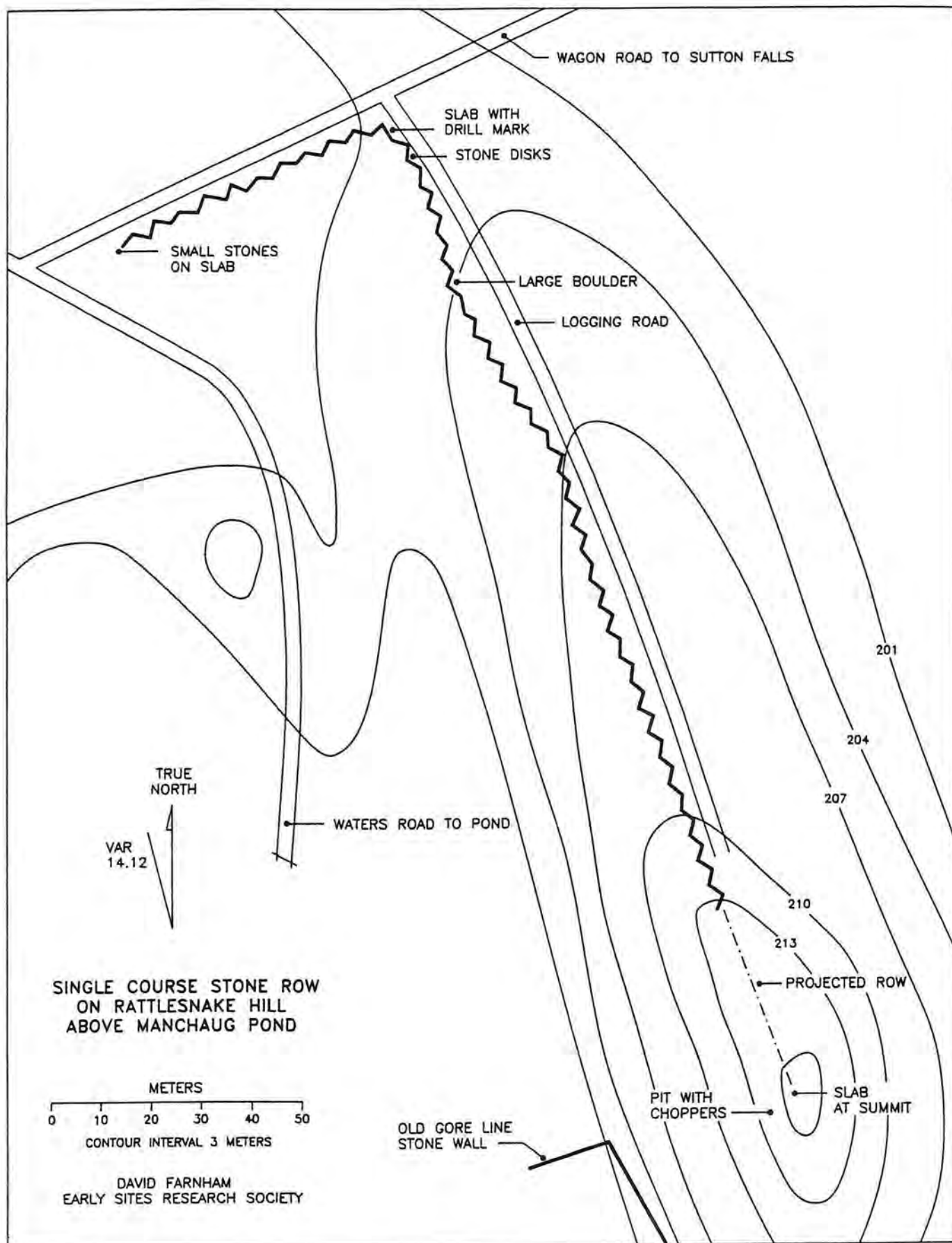
The Row as a Path

Observers agree that the sawtooth stone row on Rattlesnake Hill is manmade, but few have offered opinions on when, why and by whom it was made. The drilled slab appears to indicate that the row was worked on after iron drills were brought to America. White oral history mentions the existence of the "stone circles" prior to 1800, at which time their origin and function apparently were unknown. Sutton Falls Road, built in 1825, spared the row by accident or by intention, as did the logging road on the hill. No reference to the stone row has been found in the numerous deeds and journals of Waters Farm. The last Indian village in Sutton, located one mile northwest of Rattlesnake Hill, was abandoned and destroyed in 1675 during King Philip's War.

Local history and some features of the the stone row suggest that the row could be a path made by Nipmuck Indians for individual or communal rituals. The small stones on the slab at the start of the row could be donation stones, and the stone disks found at the base of the hill could be votive objects. The summit slab is a logical terminus and a natural place for meditation and worship.

The sawtooth pattern seems to be unique among stone rows; a possible explanation involves Algonquian chevron symbols. A right-pointing chevron (>) indicates movement in the correct direction; a left-pointing chevron (<) indicates movement in the wrong direction. Opposing chevrons (><) indicate a balance between the two movements. The sawtooth pattern of the row could be an adaptation of the balance symbol in a ritual pathway to personal and social equilibrium.







Slab at Start of Row



View along Row toward Start



Drilled Slab at Turn of Row



Row Built around Boulder



Typical Row Section



Approach to Summit



Slab at Summit



Stone Disks and Quartz Choppers

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